

28.3 The Growth of Trade and Commerce

One reason for the flowering of culture during the Renaissance was the growth of trade and commerce. Trade brought new ideas as well as goods into Europe. A bustling economy created prosperous cities and new classes of people who had the wealth to support art and learning.

Starting in the 11th century, the Crusades strengthened contacts between western Europe and Byzantine and Muslim cultures. Traders brought goods and ideas from the East that helped to reawaken interest in classical culture. In the 13th century, the Mongol conquests in Asia made it safer for traders to travel along the Silk Road to China.

The tales of the Italian traveler Marco Polo sparked even greater interest in the East. Food, art, and such luxury goods as silk and spices moved along the trade routes linking Europe to Africa and Asia.

Italian cities like Venice and Genoa were centrally located on the trade routes that linked the rest of western Europe with the East. They became bustling trading centers that attracted traders, merchants, and customers. So did cities in the north like Bruges and Brussels. Trading ships carried goods to England, Scandinavia, and present-day Russia by way of the English Channel and the Baltic and North Seas. Towns along the routes connecting southern and northern



This 15th-century French illustration shows the exchange of goods and money in a Renaissance town.

Europe, such as Cologne and Mainz in Germany, provided inns and other services for traveling merchants.

The increase in trade led to a new kind of economy. During the Middle Ages, people bartered, or traded goods for other goods. During the Renaissance, people began using coins to buy goods, creating a money economy. Coins came from many places, so moneychangers were needed to convert one type of currency into another.

As a result of all this activity, craftspeople, merchants, and bankers became more important in society. Craftspeople produced goods that merchants traded all over Europe. Bankers exchanged currency, loaned money to merchants and rulers, and financed their own businesses.

Some merchants and bankers grew very rich. With their abundant wealth, they could afford to make their cities more beautiful. Wealthy **patrons** commissioned (ordered and paid for) new buildings and art. They also helped to found (start) universities. Prosperous Renaissance cities grew into flourishing educational and cultural centers.

patron a person who supports the arts or other activities by supplying money for them



1.2C. Trade and Commerce Change Town Life

What do you see? What kinds of objects do you see in the room? What are the people doing? Who are the merchants? Who are the customers? How are the customers paying for their purchases? Why would these merchants prefer to receive coins instead of trade goods from their customers?

- ❑ In this slide we see a fifteenth-century French manuscript depicting the exchange of goods and money in a town.
- Despite plagues and wars, medieval trade and manufacturing flourished as Europe renewed contact with the eastern world. Once the initial outbreak of the Black Death had subsided, the thriving commercial life based in Europe's cities and towns bounced back and resumed steady growth. The Crusades had first brought urban European merchants, especially Italian maritime traders, into contact with Asians and Africans who marketed lucrative luxury goods such as silk, spices, ivory, and porcelain.
- As trade expanded from Europe to the east, towns became even more important as centers for shipping and banking. Bustling ports such as Venice, Pisa, and Genoa in Italy provided the vital link between Europe's trade centers and the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, where Asian trade caravans deposited their goods. Towns situated along routes connecting southern European ports with inland cities became important commercial centers, providing services for traveling merchants. These towns also developed their own industries so as to have goods to sell to business people who passed through their region, and to sell abroad. In this way, much of western Europe underwent the initial steps to change from an agriculturally based rural society to a more commercially based urban society. The demand for luxury goods in Europe created a need for coined money, because European merchants needed precious metals such as gold and silver to trade with the East. Each kingdom, trade association, and city-state minted its own currency, using, in part, precious metals from newly discovered European mines.
- The proliferation of European currencies gave rise to the most lucrative of all business activities: banking. Bankers exchanged coins from one region for the currency of another at tables set up in commercial districts. The modern word bank comes from the Italian *banchi*, the name for the counter or table where early Italian money changers set up shop. The standard against which all currencies were based was the Florentine florin, which weighed "72 grains of gold." Medieval wars helped transform banking from simple coin exchange into high finance. Monarchs, nobles, popes, and city officials came to bankers for loans to finance their military needs. In turn, the destruction and cost of wars limited the power of the feudal nobles who waged them, and wealthy merchants moved into the ensuing social vacuum as a new and powerful class in medieval European society. These

merchants made up a new class, called the *middle* class, because they were more important than the commoners but still considered less powerful than the nobles.

- Commercial activity was centered in towns because the new middle class established itself in Europe's thriving urban centers. Most towns in northern Europe were located on land originally ruled by a feudal lord. Townspeople attempted to limit the power of the feudal lord by forcing him—often with the help of the monarch—to grant them a charter. A charter outlined the rights of the townspeople, including their right to govern the town and to pay one yearly tax as opposed to many separate fees to the lord. Many town charters also gave people the right to form guilds.
- Guilds were associations of merchants, and later artisans, that governed towns by establishing wages and prices, maintaining standards of quality on goods they produced, and settling conflicts within the town. In time artisans sought greater freedom from merchants and established craft guilds. Unless an artisan was in a craft guild he or she could not produce or sell craft goods. Becoming a guild member involved a lengthy process of training, which culminated in submitting a “masterpiece” to the guild board. If the artisan's craftsmanship and character were deemed worthy, he or she was admitted into the guild. Guilds dominated the social and civic life of the towns. When guild members became sick or encountered financial difficulties, their guilds protected them. Guilds reflected the importance of Christianity in Europe during this time. Each guild adopted a patron saint for protection, and on its particular patron's feast day, the guild hosted parades and fairs in the saint's honor. Guilds also contributed money toward the building of cathedrals and city walls.
- The hierarchy of the new, urban merchant class was based on values that reflected the change in European society. In feudal times, status was based solely on one's birthright. Now, invigorated trade and bustling towns gave many people an opportunity to earn a new place in society. In the hierarchy of the middle class, one's place in society was determined by ability and wealth. These changes reflected a new belief in the worth of the individual. The opportunity to move up in society because of one's work or talent showed that Europe was entering a new age that would stress an individual's freedom over the class or role he or she was born into.



Ask four students come forward and stand in front of the slide, assuming the positions of the money changer, a merchant, and two customers. As the “on-scene reporter,” ask them these questions:

To the money changer: **Who are you? What are you doing? Do you like your job? Why do people need the services of a money changer? What other services do you provide besides exchanging different types of coins?**

To the merchant: Who are you? What are you doing? What kinds of goods do you sell? Where do the goods come from? Why are some of the goods—spices and silk, for example—so expensive? Why are merchants respected?

To two customers: Who are you? What are you doing? Why have you come to this shop? Why are you willing to pay a great deal for products such as spices, silk, and ivory? How can you be sure of the quality of the goods you are buying?

Slide 1.2C: Trade and Commerce Change Town Life



Trade and Commerce: The Foundations of Town Life

- towns were centers for trade and shipping
- luxury goods such as silk, spices, ivory, and porcelain could be bought in towns
- guilds dominated social and civic life of towns
- guilds reflected importance of Christianity in towns
 - a.) contributed to building of cathedrals
 - b.) adopted patron saints and sponsored parades in their honor

A.D. 500

1400

1650

Town Life During the *Middle Ages*

- towns were small because society was based on agriculture and most people lived in the countryside
- nobles had most of the power
 - a.) lords owned the land where most towns were located
 - b.) towns needed protection from knights that lords could provide
- status was determined by birthright

Society

Power

Status

Town Life During the *Renaissance*

- towns grew because society began to be based on commerce and more people started to live in cities
- middle class had most of the power
 - a.) limited the power of feudal lords by forcing them to grant charters
 - b.) gained control of great sums of money by organizing banks
- status was determined by wealth and ability